

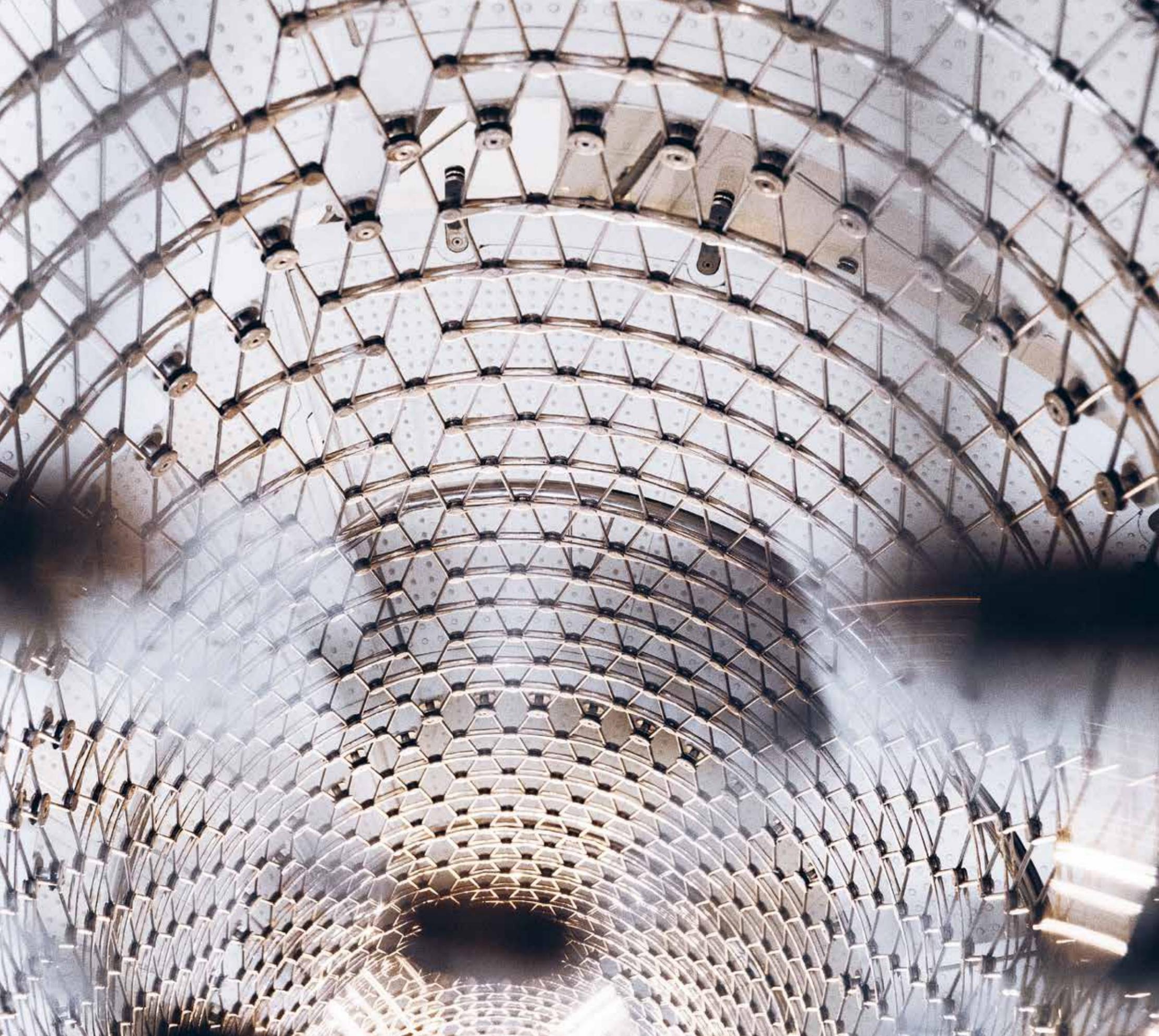


FIRST LADY OF GLASS ARCHITECTURE

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Photo: Jan Zátorský

Her glass stairs combine technological perfection and interior esthetics and have lifted her to the top of world architecture. She's worked for Václav Havel, Albert - Prince of Monaco and many companies and influential people. She rejected Steve Jobs, who asked her to design the worldwide chain of Apple stores. We met with Eva Jiřičná in Somerset House in London, a classicism building from the 18th century that is decorated by her glass Miles Staircases.





You are famous for glass architecture. Did you lean towards glass from the beginning of your career?

I played with the glass since I was a little child. It fascinates me and I love the light and its properties. I have always collected glass pieces. A piece of glass, however broken, was always the best present for me. My grandmother comes from Nová Paka, we used to visit her in the North and I was always impressed by all the glassworks there. All those wasted glass beads and pieces of glass jewelry they disposed of! I stacked them, laid them on the window and watched the light reflections. When I was in my third year of architecture studies, I got a great opportunity. I'd attended a Russian college and so spoke fairly good Russian.

What made you to attend the Russian College?

My parents concluded it is a good quality school. In 1959 a large glass exhibition took place and they needed hostesses. All significant glassmakers exhibited there, like Libenský, Hlava, or Roubíček. They sent us for a four week course on glass making, we visited all glassworks. I was nineteen I could see all the glass production! Technical glass, art glass, everything. Then I worked in the Institute of Habitation and Clothing Culture with all these glassmakers again. They were my friends, I grew up with them. When I had an opportunity to touch glass as an architect, I of course took it. Glass is the most creative material in architecture. It bounces, lets out, diverts, colours... It creates so much of an ambience. Later I have met a structural engineer, who is the best in glass calculations. He knows how to use glass as a building material. The staircases we make are precisely calculated. Glass thickness, how many layers are needed. These are very complicated calculations. And very demanding on the craft quality.

Is it the case in some countries the quality of craft is a limiting factor in building?

A number of world architects had withdrawn from ambitious buildings in China, where there are practically no building regulations. But, there used to be a problem with the quality of work. Chinese are immensely capable. Their regime allows certain things that are complicated to accomplish in a democracy. If they decide to build a dam, or a railway, they do it. The government gives an order and the work is done. In democratic countries discussions start, land needs to be purchased. Twenty years later they find out there is not enough money and the project is cancelled. In China everything is much easier. If they decide to have speedtrains, they copy Japanese ones and in a few months they are in operation. Here there are discussions about

the new railway station London – North. The purchase of land is still in question. The government decided to complete this project but when it is finished in 10 years the technologies will already be outdated.

How do they maintain quality in such a quickly built building?

In the design and architecture they still mainly copy a lot. No chance to redeem the author's rights. If Ron Arad creates a beautiful chair, they simply copy it. They buy one and produce two million pieces. Americans are building in Shanghai on a large scale and the Chinese are learning quality from them. But they learned since then. Similarly, when I arrived to Prague in 1990, there was no single company, that would be able to build from the glass on the high level. The Orangery in the Prague Castle had to be constructed by Germans. No-one in the Czech Republic was able to do that.

Did it improve after 30 years of freedom?

Today I export Czech glass building companies to the whole world. Mr. Růžička built many staircases here in England, as well as in France. People have learned. I take credit for improving the Czech craft quality by constant nagging. Usually I requested what I wanted - and always heard: this is not possible. Absolutely nothing was possible. Straight partition? No way Madam. And suddenly, it works. Perhaps I have contributed that the Czech hands of gold are able to do beautiful things again. There are numerous people in Prague now that are capable of building something of quality. There are also plenty of Czech developers in London.

How is the construction business in the Czech Republic compared to the world?

If I start talking, I will not get any more Czech Commissions (laughing). At the moment I do not even have a Czech passport. I lost it and they do not want to give me a new one. In 1968 when I emigrated, I was sentenced in my absence and my passport was revoked. I was told that first I have to ask for a pardon for that communist condemnation, and only then I can receive a new passport. I am not going to ask for a pardon, I have not done anything. My lawyer is dealing with it.

How would you describe current architecture?

Architects have great possibilities thanks to the technology available. On one hand you see all those iconic buildings that revel with shapes and colours, new materials are tried. At the same time architects are focusing

Eva Jiříčková (1939)

The famous Czech architect was born into an architectural family in Zlín, graduated in architecture at Prague Czech Technical University and Academy of Fine Arts. In 1968 she travelled to London to intern, communist authorities prevented her return until 1990 and a career with architect Richard Rogers. Famous for designing glass interiors of London and New York fashion stores. She taught architecture in Prague and in London and is a member of London Royal Academy of Arts.

on creating a maximum number of flats, there is a lack of apartments in the developed world. After WWII all countries were building state flats for those who could not afford to buy their own. Now states do not build anymore, an enormous amount of private flats are built which, in attractive cities, are horribly expensive. Their architecture is not a very high level though.

Why are so few quality architectural flats built?

There is a nice Moravian proverb: Not wanting to is worse than being unable to. If countries decided quality housing is a priority things would look different. Each young architect, leaving school, thinks that (s)he will tear down the world and create something unforgettable. There is a large group of responsible architects that try to solve the problem with housing. Also governments and cities are trying. They propose for example, that developers must provide a certain number of "affordable" flats in each new development. This is useless.

Why?

In each residential development there is about ten per cent of flats that are hard to sell. They have a lack of light. The ground floor flats. These are then offered to the municipality for a so-called decreased price, that is still too high for many people needing a place to live. There is great public pressure in Britain now to sort the





Vase Bariel, design: Jiří Šuhájek,
Hand blown from lead-free crystal, hand cut
and hand polished to a high gloss

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housing problem. The situation is even worse in the Czech Republic and I expect the pressure to grow. The housing construction there is prevented by enormous bureaucracy and excuses. Everybody is passing things to others and nobody wants to be accountable. Now I am working on a flats project in Brno, Veveří street. It is a beautiful location in the city centre. Made by reputable developer. The city would benefit very much if plenty of new flats were built in the centre. This is a so-called densification, which is by urbanists regarded and preferred as the healthiest trend for cities.

On a scale from 1 - 10, how complicated is it to build in London and in Prague? 1 is the easiest.

Here in London it is between two and three. In Prague it is nine.

We are sitting in the café at Somerset House. One of London's examples - how to combine old and modern architecture tastefully. Why does this not really work in Prague?

To build and to reconstruct in London in protected buildings is not straightforward and easy. But, there is a consensus in society that if old buildings do not get a new life and cannot be used commercially, they will be dead and regardless of possible maintenance they will decay, nobody will use it. It will just become a redundant decoration. In Prague they still fight with it and many people are hesitant to admit it. Those old and protected buildings

need to make their living, nobody will support them per se. Nobody will spend money to preserve an old building, just because it is old. People owning those old protected houses must be capable enough to come up with some commercial idea and create something just like this café we are sitting in now. Look, here is an original Georgian fireplace and an original preserved window with all details. A ledge, with all original holes and decorations. Everything is preserved just as it was built and that includes the floor. In this space, a café is created that is viable and full of contemporary details and materials. Modern ventilation and airconditioning. But all this had to be inserted into the old building. There would be a great fuss in Prague: you cannot tear down a part of this wall! There is a gothic detail on it! Etc... But we cannot prevent progress or these buildings will fall apart. Many of buildings in Prague have already, because they did not receive building permission for reconstruction.

That does not happen in London?

There was also a certain period like that here. I remember, we worked on one church, built in 1720 - similar period to Somerset House. When we got there, its roof had already fallen down. A group of developers wanted to turn it into modern offices. They wanted to invest in that. The authorities could not decide whether to give them permission to rearrange the roof. Until the frontage fell down as well - only then did they wake up. The offices are there now and in a high demand but it took ten years. And in the course of that time, the damage to the valuable monument building would not need to happen if they were able to make timely decisions. This was a period around the 80's and 90's. Then cityhall suddenly woke up.

What was the impulse?

Suddenly, there was an understanding between the majority of London cultural, bureaucratic and commercial elite and conservationists and architects that the situation must change. The whole of City of London decided: if London wants to be the financial centre of the world, something needs to happen. Conservationists and the main London urbanist, Peter Rais who held a lecture in Prague a few years ago reconsidered all the laws limiting the construction around the Thames. This is how London became the world's most important financial centre. If you walk there these days, you can see one new building after another. They speak a lot about England going through a economic depression now, but look, there is construction everywhere. If I look out of the window of my flat in Marble Arch, I can see red crane lights in the dark.

I was lucky I had an opportunity to work on large and interesting projects as soon as I got to London. Czech architects, staying at home where construction business is limited have few chances.

Right next to the Somerset House a brand new block of flats is under construction. There is a strict classification on what is a monument and the level of its protection. Similar to Prague, but here you deal with people who understand the present - a small moment between the future and the past. We keep on talking about the present but we build for the future. The time it takes in Prague to make a plan for city development! It is outdated before it goes for approval.

Why was there no similar epiphany in Prague?

Prague, unfortunately, was under the influence of communism for too long. Great architects made horrifying buildings. Such as Transgas, and others.

Are you glad it was torn down? Many architects were against it.

It's great it's gone. What's remarkable, it was young architecture students that wanted to save it, it was called brutalism. The name speaks for itself! Why protect brutalism? It's like protecting violence.

A typical example of brutalism is the Czech Embassy here in London. Would you demolish that?

I would. It was designed by outstanding architects, but concrete supporting walls do not allow flexibility. You can't reconstruct the building into something that works nowadays, when the Embassy has a completely different

function. Today's constructions are done differently. I would not tear it down for its ugliness, but because of disfunction. But after 1989, a lot was demolished in Prague. That was another extreme, that twisted into the current extreme, when you are practically unable to reconstruct anything due to the monumental protection.

What valuables were destroyed?

In 1990 I arrived in Prague with the BBC that was making a documentary about Czechoslovak architecture. We visited Václavské náměstí and all the functional houses in the city. They were in a bad state, but not damaged. Then "investors" arrived from former Yugoslavia and so much was damaged that the Monument protection authority suddenly said it was not possible to continue like that. East Germans arrived with West German marks and bought and destroyed. Look at hotel Juliš at Václavské náměstí for example, which survived communism. And this flipped into the other extreme when today hardly anything is built.

Did new generation of interesting architects grow up in the Czech Republic?

Certainly many graduates are successful in London. When I arranged internships for them, studios were excited at their skills. I had an opportunity to work on large and interesting projects as soon as I got to London. Czech architects, staying at home where building business is limited have few chances. And that is a real pity, talent is wasted.

